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Witches and Witch-Hunts: A Global History (review)

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Witches and Witch-Hunts: A Global History (review)

Abstract

When Alan Macfarlane and Keith Thomas reinvigorated the study of historical European and particularly English witchcraft in the early 1970s, they were heavily influenced by studies of witchcraft in Africa, particularly the work of E. E. Evans-Pritchard done decades earlier. While they did not primarily [End Page 121] write comparative histories (only the final section of Macfarlane's book is explicitly comparative), they drew on anthropological models to help them understand how belief in and fear of witches might have functioned in early modern English society. A door could have been flung open between the study of European and non-European systems of witchcraft. Instead, as histories of the European witch hunts proliferated in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, most scholars avoided broad, comparative arguments. Instead they stressed the particular nature of witchcraft in early modern Europe, with conceptions of "the witch" deeply rooted in Christian theology and demonology. Now Wolfgang Behringer, a major scholar of early modern witchcraft, wants to redress this tendency. His focus is witch-hunting—legal or quasi-legal actions taken against those supposed to have performed some type of maleficent magic against their neighbors. He begins not in Europe but in modern South Africa, where in 1990 a hunt claimed thirty victims. Throughout the 1990s, he notes, witch-hunting actually increased in South Africa and other parts of the African continent. He therefore contends that a purely Eurocentric, predominantly Christian conception of witchcraft is "no longer acceptable" (p. 3), nor is the comfortable notion that witch-hunting is an essentially "closed chapter in the history of mankind" (p. 8).

Disciplines

Cultural History | History of Religion | Other History | Social History

Comments

This is a book review from *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 1 (2006): 121, doi:10.1353/mrw.0.0032. Posted with permission.

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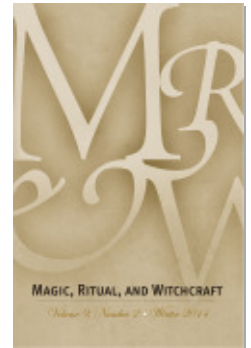
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Witches and Witch-Hunts: A Global History (review)

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come to see nature as alive. This would have reinforced teaching that preceded the initiation, as there is nothing automatic or natural about being in nature and coming to view it as a person to be interacted with. Neither the initiate nor the coven meets nature in its natural state because as Bado-Fralick notes they first put on insect repellent, although this aspect of ritual preparation is not analyzed by her.

Bado-Fralick's discussion at the beginning of the book about the insider-outsider debate within scholarship on new religions covers the basic points. It at times seems defensive as she justifies herself as scholar-practitioner. This is unfortunate but possibly necessary for scholars who are practitioners of minority religions. It is common for practitioners of mainline religions to study their own religions without raising a question of the validity of their research. Witches and others of minority faiths are often not accorded the same good will. Bado-Fralick's very intimate insider's view of initiation could only be written by a Witch. One or two times Bado-Fralick does take a partisan position of issues within the Witchcraft community, such as her criticism of feminist Witchcraft, but this is rare.

Bado-Fralick, through her insider analysis of Wiccan initiation rituals, brings into question Van Gennep's template of the initiation process. She suggests not that he was completely wrong, but that the process of separation, liminality, and reincorporation is not something that occurs as three distinct stages that are consecutively completed. Rather the individual moves among these throughout the initiation process, returning again to separation, liminality, and ultimately reincorporation. As a first person account this is a very readable book and therefore would make an excellent addition to an undergraduate course in Pagan Studies, Sociology of Religion, Folklore, or Introduction to Anthropology. It will also make a contribution to the growing literature on Wicca.

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WOLFGANG BEHRINGER. *Witches and Witch-Hunts: A Global History*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004. Pp. xxi + 337.

When Alan Macfarlane and Keith Thomas reinvigorated the study of historical European and particularly English witchcraft in the early 1970s, they were heavily influenced by studies of witchcraft in Africa, particularly the work of E. E. Evans-Pritchard done decades earlier. While they did not pri-

marily write comparative histories (only the final section of Macfarlane's book is explicitly comparative), they drew on anthropological models to help them understand how belief in and fear of witches might have functioned in early modern English society. A door could have been flung open between the study of European and non-European systems of witchcraft. Instead, as histories of the European witch hunts proliferated in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, most scholars avoided broad, comparative arguments. Instead they stressed the particular nature of witchcraft in early modern Europe, with conceptions of "the witch" deeply rooted in Christian theology and demonology. Now Wolfgang Behringer, a major scholar of early modern witchcraft, wants to redress this tendency. His focus is witch-hunting—legal or quasi-legal actions taken against those supposed to have performed some type of maleficent magic against their neighbors. He begins not in Europe but in modern South Africa, where in 1990 a hunt claimed thirty victims. Throughout the 1990s, he notes, witch-hunting actually increased in South Africa and other parts of the African continent. He therefore contends that a purely Eurocentric, predominantly Christian conception of witchcraft is "no longer acceptable" (p. 3), nor is the comfortable notion that witch-hunting is an essentially "closed chapter in the history of mankind" (p. 8).

In his second chapter, "Belief in Witchcraft," Behringer articulates a reasonable definition for "witchcraft" that can be applied to any culture: "There are evil forces around, and they try to cause harm. Some people, who are essentially anti-social, either incorporate such forces involuntarily, or form alliances with these forces intentionally in order to inflict harm by mystical means. . . . They not only act as individuals, but rather, through their alignment to evil forces, they act in groups, being part of a conspiracy" (pp. 12–13). He also notes that many cultures tend to associate such activity more with women than with men. Even in Western Europe, such notions have not disappeared, as 10 to 15 percent of Europeans, when polled, assert a belief in some form of witchcraft, although they may no longer associate witchcraft with Christian demonology and the devil.

In his next three chapters, which form the bulk of the book (about 150 out of 248 pages of text), Behringer narrows his focus to the history of Europe. "The Persecution of Witches" (Chap. 3) surveys legal responses to supposed witchcraft from Roman times through the Middle Ages. "The European Age of Witch-Hunting" (Chap. 4) surveys the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when witch trials were at their height across much of Europe. "Outlawing Witchcraft Persecution in Europe" (Chap. 5) covers the skepticism that was always present, at least about certain aspects of witchcraft and legal means used against suspected witches, throughout the period

of the major witch hunts, and discusses how such skepticism finally resulted in the end of most legal prosecutions in the eighteenth century. Behringer is a leading expert in this field and delivers valuable information and insight on almost every page. While keeping his survey broad, he does not avoid making important specific points, especially in terms of the geographical spread of the major hunts and the potential numbers of their victims. One of his main points is to stress how limited, both geographically and chronologically, were the relatively few truly massive witch hunts of this period. We should not, therefore, regard spectacular trials claiming hundreds or even thousands of victims (as sometimes occurred in this period, mainly in German lands) as the norm. Such great hunts were actually quite rare, but “witch-hunting” in terms of smaller-scale prosecutions was pervasive in Europe and clearly also exists in other parts of the world.

Chapter 6, “Witch-Hunting in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” largely returns to Africa, focusing on how European skepticism was exported through colonization, how it interacted jarringly with local systems of magical beliefs, and how in the postcolonial era a reinvigoration of traditional beliefs has led to some demands for a restoration of legalized witch-hunting. The chapter also touches briefly on Asia and the Americas, as well as the persistence of some forms of witch-hunting in modern Europe. The final chapter, “Old and ‘New Witches,’” deals with the emergence of Wiccan and other neo-pagan movements in contemporary Europe and North America, and their connections, real and supposed, to historical witchcraft. Behringer has no patience with the claims of some neo-pagans to be the direct descendents of historical witches, whom they believe practiced an ancient pagan religion. He notes that aside from neo-pagans themselves, the modern group most favorable to the argument that historical witchcraft was actually a popular form of pagan religiosity that resisted Judeo-Christian hegemony over Europe was the Nazi Party.

This is an important book, in that it calls for a broader, more comparative understanding of what witchcraft can be and what forms witch hunts can assume in various cultures. Yet the largest part of the book still focuses on the rise and fall of witch-hunting as it is traditionally understood in premodern Europe. This is unsurprising given that this is the area of Behringer’s main expertise; his survey here is valuable on many points, and informs his attempt to set witchcraft in a more global perspective in important ways. Yet that global perspective can appear to be simply a substantial addendum to what remains an essentially European story. This is not helped by the fact that when Behringer goes beyond Europe, it is almost always to Africa (not surprising since, Europe aside, Africa has been the focus of the largest body of

witchcraft scholarship). Thus, this book is really a useful survey of historical European witchcraft and witch-hunting, with an extension of that history into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, along with a comparison to colonial and postcolonial Africa. That, in itself, is no small accomplishment. Nor is Behringer's point about the need to think about and study witchcraft in far broader terms than has typically been the case any less valuable because he has not presented us with a study as broad as could possibly be imagined or hoped for. What remains to be seen is whether Behringer's call will serve to open doors to comparative scholarship and interpretation that have largely remained shut for the past forty years.

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HANS PETER BROEDEL. *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Popular Belief*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003. Pp. 209.

There is perhaps no historical text more associated in the popular imagination with the horrors of the European witch hunts than the infamous *Malleus maleficarum*, commonly ascribed to the Dominicans Heinrich Kramer (Institoris) and Jacob Sprenger (in fact much evidence points to Kramer as the sole author). Proclaimed to be *the* great witch-hunting manual of the late-medieval and early-modern period, the *Malleus* has been held by some as a definitive statement of authoritative conceptions of witchcraft. In fact, scholars of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries have long recognized that the *Malleus* was in many respects an idiosyncratic work, that its influence was far from pervasive, and that its authority was far from absolute. A major goal of Hans Peter Broedel's study is to modify what may indeed now be an overly developed tendency to argue against the importance of the *Malleus* and its centrality in the construction of witchcraft. He does not return to any simplistic notion of completely pervasive influence, nor does he claim the *Malleus* is representative of the all currents of European thought on witchcraft. Rather, by exploring the work's uniqueness, he seeks to uncover what made it for several centuries such a compelling statement of the idea of witchcraft.

Few works as well known as the *Malleus* have been the subject of as little focused study. Although the work is mentioned in virtually every account of European witchcraft, this is the first scholarly book in English, and one of